

ANALYSIS

The Malefactors (1956)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"I want to say one more thing, in defense of poor old Claiborne. He is, indeed but a pale reflection of you but I think he's admirable. There were two effects I got that particularly pleased me. First, that he was nearly always right, even when he didn't know it, even when he [was] doing the wrong thing. That is, I think I showed him the seer that is in every poet. The other effect was that everybody he met, from the leading characters in the book to people he met only once, like the girl he met in the hall or the young man who was writing the editorial and also the priest--all of them not only liked him but recognized that he had remarkable qualities."

Gordon

Letter to Allen Tate (9 November 1955)

"A 'profoundly conceived, incandescent story' wherein Gordon emerges 'as the best woman novelist we have in this country at this time.' Here, again, alienation is 'a removal from God to whom we have become strange children.' The 'terms of the organizing dynamic of the spirit' are 'innocence, knowledge, salvation through grace, and the renewal of innocence.' The novel is not simply 'another witty and malicious *roman a clef*'; the malice, as the title hints, 'is a function of its personae, not a personal vendetta of the author's."

Gordon's moral attack has many opponents in the novel, but 'the slipperiest antagonist of all' is the protagonist Tom Claiborne. 'The symbolic force of her characters' names...deserves critical treatment.' The central problem of the novel [is] 'the problem of redemption'... 'Revelation is mysterious and grace is sudden.' Homosexuality is one of the 'sub-themes, or rather, counter-themes' of the novel, and is given original treatment in the claim, through the Irish nun, that homosexuality is...part of man's larger agony: the 'external search for wholeness.' This 'strange chapter' is 'surely one of them most extraordinary in modern fiction.'

The 'artificial insemination issue' present in the opening of the novel is 'a parable' of 'the desire to isolate and identify the creative element in man' which is one of Gordon's concerns, and prepares for the final correlation between increasing nearness to 'the divine in themselves which is God' and the renewal of creative powers."

Vivienne Koch

"Companions in the Blood"

Sewanee Review 64:645-51 (1956)

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan

Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide

eds. Robert E. Golden and Mary C. Sullivan (G. K. Hall 1977) 250-51

"*The Malefactors* is her 'most ambitious novel,' a work of 'great intelligence'; its life is in its 'observed detail' and 'fine structure.' Gordon creates 'daily life...as few writers have,' in order to 'give authenticity to her perception of its meaning, a perception which controls every detail in the novel'.... The perception 'is Roman Catholic; but it is a perception, not an argument,' and 'accounts for everything' in Tom's experience, as well as for the 'world's lost and twisted people'."

Arthur Mizener

"What Matters with Tom"

New York Times Book Review (4 March 1956) 4, 32

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 252

"A novel of ideas and manners, a literary form in which Caroline Gordon has few contemporary peers.' It is also clearly a *roman a clef*: Horne Watts is Hart Crane; 'the other characters may no doubt be equally

easily identified by the initiate.' Tom Claiborne resembles Stephen Lewis of *The Strange Children*. Catherine is 'a sort of medieval abbess in the Bowery.' Tom's final recognition of 'meaning and order and grace in Roman Catholic values...if it is in the nature of a conversion, comes by as extraordinary a route as any in recent fiction.' Gordon 'recreates with mastery one intellectual milieu in which a concern for such values might develop.' It is a highly individual group 'with its own special wit and argot' built up over the years. In fact the milieu is here presented more clearly than 'is any achievement of certitude on the part of Claiborne or his circle.' *The Malefactors* 'remains at its most rewarding a comedy of manners'."

Coleman Rosenberger

"Artists, Writers, and Their Problems in Miss Gordon's Comedy of Manners"
New York Times Herald Tribune Book Review (25 March 1956) 3
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 253

"It is 'beautifully contrived...weighted with curious but fascinating learning.' For lazy readers its virtues will be 'high hurdles'; for others, there will be 'too much religion or too much (concealed) Jung.' But in terms of the craft of fiction, *The Malefactors* with its 'nearly faultless' construction 'will be judged the finest of Miss Gordon's eight novels, though not her most ingratiating.' The complex story has a plot 'almost as simple, in reduction, as that of *The Golden Bowl*'."

It is Tom's story, though Catherine is the dominating figure. Vera must learn disinterested love; Tom, forgiveness of others. Gordon 'accomplishes all she has to do' through 'subtle and suitable devices'; e.g., Tom's poetic but unproductive consciousness, and the 'technical triumph' of the 'three-fold movement of the novel, which accords perfectly with the movement of Tom's mind': his hyperintensive staring at his present world, his imaginative return to its past causes, and the forward thrust exerted by 'the characters who act on Tom.' 'I know of no modern novel in which this polyphony of present, past, and future is so skillfully composed'."

Willard Thorp

"The Redemption of the Wicked"
New Republic (30 April 1956) 21
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 256

"'Because of its absolute perfection of form,' *The Malefactors* is the culmination of Gordon's 'unremitting search for suitable techniques with which to project the inner lives of her complex and fascinating characters. It may also prove to be a turning point in her choice of themes and locale.' Gordon's fiction 'invites comparison with that of Elizabeth Madox Roberts,' though there are 'marked differences,' including Gordon's superior ability to create male characters....

In *The Strange Children* 'a new note is faintly sounded.' At the end, Lucy 'stands with her father looking up at the stars.' This 'muted emphasis on a religious theme prepares us for its full development in *The Malefactors*' where at least Tom and Vera 'discover the way up and are re-born.' As the South has faded from Gordon's novels, 'religion has taken its place, and the way is up.'"

Thorp

"The Way Back and the Way Up: The Novels of Caroline Gordon"
Bucknell Review 6 (December 1956) 1-15
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 256-57

"The novel is 'cunningly and curiously wrought'; 'nothing fortuitous or gratuitous'... Gordon's works 'have always been remarkable for their subtle poetic essence and vigilant craftsmanship.' *The Malefactors* features 'a poet who, approaching middle age and seemingly forsaken by his muse, makes the discovery of Christ'--and this, in Pennsylvania's Bucks County, 'the penultimate of Eden, it would seem, of reflective or refuted artists.' Tom Claiborne's poetry-mentor Horne Watts 'is the literary evocation and transmutation of the actual poet Hart Crane'....

Gordon's epigraph for the novel--'It is for Adam to interpret the voices which Eve hears' (Maritain) specifies 'the relationship between the practical or critical intelligence and poetic intuition'.... 'The poet is nourished by his intuitions, but it is the critical intelligence (Adam) which must decide on the authenticity

of what the soul (Eve) experiences.' In the novel, Claiborne's 'critical spirit has in the course of years gained ascendancy over the creative spirit' yet ironically 'is powerless to probe his own malaise.' In all this Gordon 'handles the voices superbly, locating each with its distinctive intonation,' and exhibiting 'an admirable virtuosity in the deployment of symbols and echoes.'

Even the host of minor figures 'have their function' and 'the dead, too, possibly even more than the living, join in that skillfully discordant choir which, at one level of meaning, constitutes the Adam who interprets the voices of Eve.' In the end, Tom was 'obviously and not too implausibly in the toils of Grace' and Gordon, avoiding cliché, had come closer than any vernacular writer to encompassing the elusive miracle' of conversion.'

John W. Simons
"A Cunning and Curious Dramatization"
Commonweal (13 April 1956) 54-56
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 254-55

"Such a book is 'a composed thing, a work of form and texture impeccably manifested in the rendering of complex material. It is a mastering of words of a certain stretch of human experience, so that everything that needs telling is richly told, but without frills or fuss.' Tom Claiborne's point of view is 'expertly sustained.' The novel 'perceptively and convincingly' deals with 'a most difficult subject': 'the progress of a religious conversion.' Gordon's characterization is 'precise and profound' and her writing 'has a sensitive, sharp, even critical authority'."

Richard Sullivan
"A Precise, Profound, Sensitive Novel"
Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine of Books (18 March 1956) 4
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 255-56

"The book becomes suddenly powerful and streamlined,' a 'fairly transparent *roman à clef*, and Miss Gordon has not worried very much about obscuring the key' (Hart Crane, Dorothy Day). The novel is 'an imitation of nature' in the oldest sense of that critical criterion, where 'nature' means the human essence, not its accidents. Yet Miss Gordon mirrors the essence in its accidents, as a fiction writer must, finding the universal in the local.' 'The probity and range of the story are classical, with the sublime red bull, ancient double-image, munching in the middle of it'."

Dorothy Van Ghent
"Technique and Vision: Some Recent Fiction"
Yale Review 45:625-33 (1956)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 257-58

"Gordon, an expatriate herself for a time, has made this a 'lost-and-found generation novel.' Here is 'a kind of purgatory on the road to religious serenity.' With its 'semi-autobiographical overtones' (Gordon's recent conversion to Roman Catholicism), the book...is 'written with sensibility'...and may inadvertently reveal that the Lost Generation was 'born to be led astray and taken in'.... 'Horne Watts...is clearly modeled on the late Hart Crane'."

Anonymous
"Ode to the Expatriate Dead," *Time* (12 March 1956) 124
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 246

"*The Malefactors* is 'a strange book, dealing as it does with spiritual and emotional deviates'... 'An ambient...portrait of some rather liberated literati and aesthetes... Catholicism is an intermittent influence'." [This minimizes the power and import of the concluding religious conversion.]

Anonymous
Review of *The Malefactors*
Kirkus 24:16 (1956)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 246

"A picture of sick intellectuals [with] some spots of excellent writing."

Rosemary G. Benet

"Neurotic People"
Saturday Review (17 March 1956) 15
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 246-47

"*The Malefactors* is not only 'the culmination of her work' but also 'the final flower of the quest that has ordered Caroline Gordon's whole artistic career. It is an answer to unremitting prayer. It is the revelation of ontological motivation.' The dramatic conflict in sex relationships 'constitutes the axis on which her fictional world turns.... It is the creative core in nature by which she intuits life's meaning. And it is the key by which she eventually unlocks a material world to the Christian spirit.'

In a sense, all her novels before *The Malefactors* 'were exploratory and transitional,' attempts to 'find the terms of moral conviction and Christian salvation in the context of contemporary life.' Finding these terms was her ontological quest. Moreover, she 'had to invent a strategy and tactic to give them dramatic weight. to make the action real'.... All Gordon's work is a 'progress toward *The Malefactors*,' which is, categorically, 'a story of Christian conversion.... The truth of what Gordon has done in *The Malefactors* lies in 'our realizing what Tom Claiborne finally found' in Horne Watts's poem: a recognition of man's ontological motivation toward God, 'however impaled in flesh he may be'."

Brainard Cheney
"Caroline Gordon's Ontological Quest"
Renascence 16 (Fall 1963) 3:12
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 269

"Gordon's re-creation of 'the Dantesque experience in her own terms, in images which we recognize as being peculiar to our own generation,' and as 'the culmination of her work.' Her subject here is 'the actual experience, not the mere fact, of religious conversion.' In *The Malefactors* Gordon adopts 'the same convention of social comedy that she used in *The Strange Children*, but she has informed it with a scheme that is far more ambitious than anything in the earlier novel: 'a *Commedia* that follows something of the plan of Dante's poem. (*The Malefactors* was originally subtitled *A Comedy*).'

The *Purgatorio* is that part of Dante's *Commedia* which is 'most inclusive in its reach of experience.' In *The Malefactors*, Tom Claiborne 'undergoes a spiritual experience like that of Dante in the *Purgatorio*: his state of mind allows him to reach far into the past to reconstruct the events which have brought him to his present condition, and at the end he has a vision which anticipates the *Paradiso Terrestre*.' Vera is 'the Beatrice of the novel'; George Crenfrew, the Virgil; Cynthia, the Siren of *Purgatorio* XIX; Catherine Pollard, the Matelda; and Horne Watts, the Arnaut Daniel of *Purgatorio* XXVI. 'The bull is a major symbol of the action,' ambivalently representing both fecundity and mechanical bestiality.

The novel corresponds, in its parts, to Dante's days and nights on the mount of Purgatory. Toward the end, Tom 'passes through a wall of flame himself' and learns 'that he must forgive these dead men [Horne Watts and Carlo Vincent] whom he has resented so long.' This is the limit of the secular wisdom Crenfrew (Virgil) can offer him.... The experience depicted in [Dante's] *Commedia* is an archetypal one, freely available to succeeding generations... Knowledge of the Dantesque scheme in *The Malefactors* 'adds another dimension to the action, which is thus played out against something larger than itself.'"

Ashley Brown
"The Novel as Christian Comedy"
Reality and Myth, William E. Walker and Robert L. Welker, eds.
(Vanderbilt U 1964) 161-78
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 272-73

"In *The Malefactors* (1956), Miss Gordon [makes] Catherine Pollard spiritually central to the novel from the first time she appears in it, even though the skeptical poet Tom Claiborne is the central intelligence. Claiborne is, like Stephen Lewis, a lapsed middle-aged poet, who has lost the capacity to relate freshly to life. He is restless and sensitive, because his creativity is thwarted. Vera, his wife, makes his life an easy but a barren one on her Pennsylvania estate.

One of his shallow associates describes, in a moment of insight, Claiborne's failing, his never having 'been aware of the existence of another human being.' When he and Vera separate over his affair with her cousin Cynthia Vail, he attacks Vera in order to defend himself, accusing her of his own preoccupation with the self. Claiborne later sees the truth, how he has described a circle about himself and struck away any living things springing up in it. How then, he wonders, can he now expect Vera to breathe willingly 'the impoverished air' which envelops him?

Claiborne is a misguided son of the world instead of a son of light. His secular values extinguish the poetic inspiration which had once been genuine; and the 'cold determination to write more verses' which followed upon his early creativity has been stultifying. With creativity gone and nothing left to arouse him to loyalty or action, it is not surprising, once the prop of marriage is gone, that Vera tries to gain release from her empty life through suicide. When his affair with Cynthia goes flat, Claiborne realizes that Vera had been searching for darkness and that he, to, has been seeking such oblivion all his life. The death wish grows powerful, then, as he contemplates jumping from his apartment house window.

Miss Gordon's notable achievement is to keep us interested in the culpable Claiborne. We are immediately immersed in his situation and in his evaluation of his contemporaries and his own past life. They are often perceptive, for he knows the weaknesses of the people in his set; and he can see clearly, within limits, his own acts. He has intelligence and talent...to offset his failures in sympathy, imagination, and purposiveness. The fact, too, that he can learn from experience elevates him over most of the other people in the novel who are satisfied with life in a secular and hedonistic wasteland. His associates are the malefactors, so named because they do wrong and recall the criminals crucified with Christ, one of whom resisted salvation even while he was dying. Claiborne at least retains the poet's receptivity toward experience even if he has lost the power to interpret it meaningfully.

Before long he perceives the worth of Vera whom he has abandoned for life with the literary Cynthia. Cynthia has green, vixen-like eyes in contrast to Vera's blue, steady gaze. Cynthia's beauty and talent blind him to her shallow, calculating nature; and it is not until after they give a large party that he sees her for what she is, a self-centered person even more guilty than he has been of a failure to 'know how other people feel.' As for Vera, we at first see her through Claiborne's eyes and judge her with his good-natured indulgence and latent dissatisfaction. Her activities as a lady farmer do not channel her energies effectively and, in fact, make her seem faintly ridiculous.

Her involvement with Bud, the prize Red Poll bull, reveals a connoisseur's fussiness more than the Christian's love for a form of created life. The fete which she stages in honor of the bull is in part a thanksgiving rite, in part a Saturnalia; and the bull itself suggests a priapic deity. The bull is not only a sexual but a reality symbol. After the party is over, Claiborne feels there is more truth in the bull's vitality than he or his friends will ever express. The revulsion with which both Claiborne and Vera receive the propaganda of the inseminator at the fete reveals them both as opposed to the coarser manifestations of a secular culture. They regard this man's manipulation of nature as unnatural and contrary to the way that things were meant to be.

Gradually, Vera's strengths emerge. Her love for Claiborne is unquestioned if too protective. For one thing, she wants him to return to her after he has begun the affair with Cynthia; for another, she knows such excess of feeling that she attempts suicide. When her latent Catholicism awakes, however, she finds completion in tending Joseph Tardieu (the now senile author of *The Green Revolution*) and a physically deprived little boy, while she works on one of Catherine Pollard's farms. Claiborne accuses her of interested motives in not granting him a divorce so that she can more readily retain the child.

But he now sees how baseless this accusation is when he looks directly into her blue eyes. Hitherto he had evaded her glance because it made him uncomfortable; her innocence was an affront, and he hated her momentarily because of her scrutiny of his face when she found him in Cynthia's apartment. Her eyes 'are the mirror of the soul' and symbolize the spiritual realities basic to her nature, though her life with Claiborne for a while overshadows them; and her eyes have an intensity comparable in their effects to Beatrice's in *The Divine Comedy*. Claiborne also overcomes his aversion to his dead father especially after a friend, the psychiatrist George Crenfew, interprets one of his dreams. George explains how, in the dream,

the elder Claiborne had tried to protect his son from the excesses of his nature, especially the tendency to blunt his emotions by intellectualizing his experiences. The epigraph from Maritain, 'It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears,' comments upon Claiborne's failure until the end to bring his mind into a fruitful relationship with intuition.

In his course toward enlightenment, two Roman Catholics help him. Sister Immaculata is writing a study of the dead homosexual poet Horne Watts, who had been a friend of the Claibornes in their expatriate year and who gains some of this force through his resemblances to Hart Crane. She instructs Claiborne that the heart of man is wicked but that no man need yield to all his impulses. There is hope, too, for fallen man, since 'the Humanity of the Word,' as Watts perceived, is the bridge between earth and heaven. She regards God as the Hound of Heaven who tracks us down when we would avoid him. Claiborne is impressed by her in spite of his agnosticism.

Catherine Pollard is modeled in part on Dorothy Day, a Catholic well known for her philanthropy in the 1930's and later in behalf of New York City outcasts. Catherine is the other agent in Claiborne's renovation, a beautiful woman who has turned from a frivolous life to saintlike effacement. She now runs a shelter in New York and some farms in outlying regions for the homeless. For her these outcasts are not 'offal' but 'Christ,' and 'we must be Christ to them.' For all his skepticism, Claiborne recognizes unusual sensations in Catherine's presence: ease and a sense of relaxation, a sense of being plunged into an unknown element, a sense that he and she may be going toward a common goal.

She also asserts that Horne Watts, through all the disorders of his life, was trying to find love, that 'the love of love' sustained him through his sufferings. In Claiborne's last dream, Horne Watts guides him to a praying woman who resembles Catherine before she fades from sight. This is a sign to him that he should seek her out in his own extremity; and he finds her in Saint Eustace's chapel adjoining her shelter. She encourages him to seek Vera again although Vera has just rejected his overtures. Vera is a Catholic, Catherine asserts, and recognizes the sacramental aspect of marriage and will be subject to her husband as the Church is subject to Christ. Through Catherine, Claiborne learns that human relationships must be cherished and made firm through love, and he discovers the authority of a spiritual reality that transcends the self.

The book abounds in Christian images, particularly those connected with the saints featured in it, Catherine of Siena, Saint Ciannic whose statue is in the Claiborne garden, and Saint Eustace. The latter's miraculous powers and ultimate failure indicate that the Christian faith can move mountains and yet be ineffectual in many worldly contingencies. Eustace was a Roman general converted to Christianity when he saw the sign of the Cross poised between the horns of a deer. He and his family tamed the lions to which they were exposed but succumbed when they were thrust into a brazen bull and burned to death. Insofar as Bud's animalism is destructive, he may be linked with the bull in the Eustace legend or with the minotaur figure of the classics. The fete in honor of the bull at Vera's farm takes place in 1946 on the feast day of Saint Eustace, September 22. This has been through no design on Vera's part, despite her own fondness for the saint, at least for his church in Rome.

Most effective in extending the perspectives of the book are Claiborne's dreams. These primarily concern caves and have some basis in his experience. He had explored much in caves when a boy. In a cave similar to the one which he and George had found long ago, he and Cynthia have their first carnal contact. Claiborne's recurring dream is of a broad river that opens into a cavern. In the dream the current swirls him along until he sees the cavern yawning for him at the end of a tributary stream. The dream always ends here until the affair with Cynthia gains momentum. Then he is swept into the cavern itself. The cavern represents the chaos and the flux of the unconscious life, which can be terrifying without some clue how one is to travel through it.

He wishes to begin a new life with Cynthia, even if this means consulting like Saul the Witch of Endor or descending like Odysseus to Orcus to gain intelligence from the dead. In Cynthia's company he seems to be wandering in a vast cavern while she casts a new (but not necessarily valid) light on the figures of all the people he has known. In another dream a woman guards the stairs leading to a vast hall below. Once there, he sits at a table with others, only to find that their robes cover figures without flesh; and he knows then

that he is in hell. In Cynthia's presence, we can infer, he sees things falsely and he yields to dark, mindless, corrosive, evil instincts. She is no reliable guide in exploring the deepest facets of the self, although at first he experiences with her a release of powers that have long been submerged within him.

The caves of the unconscious may illuminate as well as obscure; and they allow us to confront, for what they are, the elemental realities of the self. In a dream that has for locale the cave that he and George once found, his father prevents him from throwing himself over a cliff and destroying himself as Horne Watts and Carlo Vincent (the mad painter who was Vera's father) do in the dream (they were suicides in life as well). Another dream with a cave as locale allows Claiborne again to confront reality, the dream already discussed in which Catherine Pollard helps him to see the truth about himself and Vera. He finds her praying in Saint Eustace's chapel, just as he had seen her in the cave of his dream. This chapel is the cavern toward which his essential being had been bearing him, in spite of his being detained in other caves along his pilgrim's way. Here he receives from Catherine the kiss of Christ. In her counsel to him, moreover, the structural lines of the novel converge. The uneasy marriage of Claiborne and Vera yielded to division; but now, with Catherine's blessing, Claiborne wishes a firmer union with Vera than he has known before.

In this novel as in her others, Caroline Gordon reaches a just balance between idea and the fact, the abstract and the concrete, the metaphysical and the physical. Her novels and short stories take us in a speculative direction and enlarge upon issues that are intellectual and spiritual. But always the abstraction has its basis in the people and the circumstances of the world as she has known it. In her mind and art she has weighed dispassionately the claims of intuition and intelligence, and has been her own best interpreter of the voices that she has heard. In her work sensibility and intellect reach that dynamic equilibrium in which the one faculty strengthens the other. This constantly controlled inspiration of her accounts, too, for the even quality and the consistent excellence of her books.

Qualities that we associate with the southern mind dominate Miss Gordon as they do writers as various as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren. Like these distinguished contemporaries of hers, she has made creative use of the tragic dimensions of human life, the aborted aspirations of most human beings, the sense of evil infecting the good and true, the glories and the burdens of a legendary past, the sense of cultures and individuals in conflict, and a feeling for place that becomes a muted passion.

It is the strength of Miss Gordon's work to suggest continually new facets of significance as one lives through the books in his mind. The characters and the incidents form new configurations with the result that the significance of any one of her books enlarges constantly as one reviews it. Her purpose has been from the beginning to suggest that reality is spiritual as well as empiric, immaterial as well as material. Accordingly, she has presented the experience of her characters in time and then again as it reaches beyond time. The ineffable dimensions of her materials she suggests through a discerning use of myths; and in her later books Christianity reinforces their universal implications. In the first instance, however, her books are faithful to the requirements of art, no matter where they lead philosophically. Only in the most general sense, then, are the books doctrinal.

As a writer Miss Gordon is the inquiring moralist even before she is the religious writer. Because of her passionate concern with the way life should be, her books are rooted in social realities even as they look toward the visionary. Intelligence, compassion, psychological insight, depth of vision, and stylistic distinction inform a canon of work that impresses always by its comprehensiveness and strength."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 38-45

"By the time she writes *The Malefactors* Gordon 'believes that social order can be recovered only after religious conversion of the membership. In the face of this new religious preoccupation, her interest in the question of women's place in the world in which no men, or very few, are to be found has diminished,' though it has not disappeared.... In the most recent of her books Gordon 'sees hope for the Southern woman, and for all the South, in the framework of the paternalistic Roman Catholic Church.' Social and religious hierarchies are 'interdependent; one can recover with the other and neither will do by itself'."

Marie Fletcher
"The Fate of Women in a Changing South: A Persistent Theme in the Fiction of Caroline Gordon"
Mississippi Quarterly 21 (Winter 1967-68) 17-28
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 280

"*The Malefactors* (1956)...begins where *The Strange Children* left off; the protagonist of this second 'Catholic' novel is in much the same position spiritually that Stephen Lewis was at the end of *The Strange Children*--he is in need of religious faith but unable to believe. There is, however, an important difference: Stephen Lewis is aware of his deficiency; Thomas Claiborne, protagonist of *The Malefactors*, is not, at least not at the beginning of the novel. Indeed, *The Malefactors* is the story of Claiborne's spiritual awakening and of his eventual religious conversion....

As the novel opens, Thomas Claiborne is at breakfast on the terrace of his wife's rural home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.... Each day he locks himself away in his study and pretends to his wife that he is working on a long poem. Actually, he does little more than lie on a couch and let his erudite mind wander. Indeed, things have come to such a pass that Claiborne has begun to carry on a dialogue with himself, or rather with a 'voice' inside his head that makes critical comments about his behavior and state of mind.... His wife...Vera is a rich woman with a passion for farming and for raising red poll cattle, and this is the day of a festival she is having to show her prize bull, Bud. To Vera's festival come Molly Archer, a rich widow recently remarried; her new husband Ed, the editor of a big circulation magazine; George Crenfrew, a psychiatrist and Claiborne's first cousin; Crenfrew's wife Marcia, a psychologist with a penchant for seeing life in terms of sexual perversion; Max Shull, a painter who knew the Claibornes years before when they were living in Paris and who is now existing on Vera's bounty.

There are also a number of 'natives': Joe Hess, a farmer, who is enthusiastic about artificial insemination in cattle, and Ed Applekeller, a Dunkard, who is just as strongly opposed to it. In addition, there are two women visitors from the 'outside world': Cynthia Vail, a cousin of Vera who has left her husband in Wisconsin and who has gone East to establish a career as a poet, and Catherine Pollard, who was George Crenfrew's first wife and who now runs a Catholic hostel for social outcasts in the slums of New York.

Among the gaily decorated stands and stalls of Vera's festival, Tom Claiborne, superior and detached, moves with a whisky in his hand. Of the guests, only two people engage his interest: Vera's cousin Cynthia Vail and Catherine Pollard, who has come down from New York for Vera's festival. The attraction that these women exert on Claiborne is of a very different order. Cynthia exacts from Claiborne a sense of obligation for something that happened in the past--she makes him feel that he owes her something. Catherine Pollard, on the other hand, fills Claiborne with a 'curious lightness of heart,' and he cannot 'rid himself of the impression that they had agreed to travel together to...a goal so splendid that he had glimpsed it only in dreams....' But Claiborne is not ready to make that journey yet, for he has not learned what it means to suffer.

In time, he learns; and Cynthia Vail, Vera's cousin, teaches him. At first, as Claiborne becomes interested in Cynthia, he feels, or imagines he feels, a resurgence of his old creative powers. He takes Cynthia as his mistress and breaks with Vera. Then he assumes the editorship of a large-circulation literary magazine, which is for him a kind of artistic prostitution. Cynthia persuades him to 'borrow' two very elegant apartments belonging to a literary 'lion hunter' and her invalid husband. At first, Claiborne resists, but after some pressure from Cynthia, he acquiesces. For a time, he conceals from Vera his affair with Cynthia; then, because of an argument with Marcia Crenfrew, the Freudian psychologist, his infidelity is exposed. Vera forgives him, but Claiborne leaves her for Cynthia. Vera tries to commit suicide but is prevented by her brother, Robin. When Claiborne hears of Vera's attempt to kill herself, he is deeply upset; but since he is still unaware of the suffering that pushed Vera to such an extreme, he makes no real effort to see her....

Claiborne reads a letter from Catherine Pollard asking him to come to her hostel on Mott Street in the Bowery to talk to a nun who is writing a book about Horne Watts, a talented but perverted young poet whom Claiborne had known years before. When Claiborne almost against his will goes to see the nun, his

visit marks the beginning of the change in his life. The nun, Sister Immaculata, tells him that Horne Watts's homosexuality and impassioned frenzy were attempts to find God. Claiborne rejects most of what the nun tells him about Watts, and he also refuses her invitation to pray for 'our boy.'

That same evening at a party that he and Cynthia stage in the borrowed apartments, Claiborne begins to realize the extent to which he has sunk morally. He is humiliated, first of all, by the falseness of his and Cynthia's situation and, second, by the presence of several of the guests who have come to see the 'love nest' or to fulfill their sense of obligation. He also begins to feel the corruption implicit in his possession of these lavish apartments, but what really opens Claiborne's eyes is a quarrel with Cynthia over his behavior at the party. Cynthia says he spoiled the party by offending a rich and important guest who might withdraw money from a project in which she is interested. In his argument with Cynthia, Claiborne is forced to recognize that Cynthia is without feelings or principles that are unrelated to her own self-advancement; he is also made aware that, whatever Vera's faults, she is 'at least a woman.'

That night, after his quarrel with Cynthia, Claiborne has a nightmare that is so horrifying it sends him fleeing to his good friend and cousin George Crenfew, who happens also to be a psychiatrist. Crenfew's analysis of Claiborne's dream makes him realize things about himself and about his father, whom he hates, that he had not known before; but the interview solves nothing, first, because Claiborne is still not prepared to face the truth about himself and, second, because psychotherapy is not the road marked out for his recovery. After Claiborne has left Crenfew's office and has gone home, he sees, while in a drunken state of mental clarity, the truth: Vera is the only one in the world who does not judge him and the reason, of course, is that she loves him.

This insight is the product of Claiborne's own suffering, and it moves him to act. Unshaven, and in clothing so wrinkled that he is easily mistaken for a bum, Claiborne goes in search of Vera. He finds her on Catherine Pollard's farm for social derelicts, tending a senile old man and a dumb child. A priest whom Claiborne encounters there tells him to remember that a wife is subject to her husband as the Church is to Christ, but Claiborne in his fallen state is unable to assert any mastery over Vera. Instead, he quarrels with her and races madly back to New York City.

Alone in his apartment that night, Claiborne has another vivid dream in which Horne Watts appears and leads him to Catherine Pollard. The next morning Claiborne rushes off to see Catherine, bearing a small bouquet of flowers. He finds her in the chapel of her hostel on Mott Street. During their talk, Catherine tells him something that makes it possible for him to go back to Vera. When she was a small child, Vera was baptized Catholic. The knowledge that Vera is in the Church and therefore subject to its laws gives Claiborne the courage to assert his mastery over her. It also produces in him the first signs of genuine humility. He thinks, as he is driving back to the farm to see Vera again, that, if there is not bed for him there, he can sleep in the hay. And then this sentence brings the book to its close: 'He could be sitting there on the bench with the other bums when she came down in the morning.' This desired reunion with Vera and the calm sense of his own unworthiness evidently signify Claiborne's religious conversion.

The Malefactors is clearly Caroline Gordon's most ambitious, most complex, and technically her most accomplished long work. Her handling of Claiborne's central intelligence point of view is so masterful that we immediately recall Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, which has obviously been an influence on this novel. However, Thomas Claiborne's intelligence and the nature of his discovery are quite different from that of Lambert Strether. Strether's revelation comes almost entirely because of outer events; Claiborne's in large part because of changes going on within him. Claiborne learns, as does Strether, during the course of the action; but the change that takes place in him is deeper and of more significance than that which occurs in James's hero. I do not imply, of course, that *The Malefactors* is better than *The Ambassadors*, but only that it is, because of certain technical resemblances, a similar kind of novel.

Another impressive technical accomplishment in *The Malefactors* is the way Miss Gordon abandons; to some extent, straightforward chronology in favor of a more poetic compositional method. There is a plot, but it has been so flattened and interspersed with bits and pieces from the past and with seemingly irrelevant scenes in the present that we are not often aware that a story is being told.... By telling her story this way, Miss Gordon is able to juxtapose characters and events that could not be related by a more

conventional temporal narrative structure. For example, a sequence of three scenes toward the middle of the book appears to have no significant relationship. In the first scene, Claiborne encounters his wife hulling walnuts under a tree; in the second, he is in his Aunt Virginia's bedroom; in the third he is on his way to see his mistress again and encounters Vera still seated beneath the tree hulling walnuts.

The scene that takes place in Virginia Claiborne's bedroom appears to have no meaningful connection to what came before or to what is about to happen. Claiborne and his aunt merely talked about Eupedon, the family estate in Kentucky which was flooded to make way for a vast power project. Aunt Virginia tells a sentimental anecdote about how she 'first learned about Santa Claus' and about how kind Claiborne's father was to 'children and niggers.' There are reminiscences about the walnut trees at Eupedon, and Aunt Virginia bitterly laments the loss of those trees and of the family estate that is now under water. The scene closes as Aunt Virginia tells Claiborne: 'After all, it's something to be a Claiborne. I hope you'll never forget that, Tom.'

Except as possible background material about Claiborne's origins, this scene...seems pointless, but as we begin the next chapter with its opening sentence ('Vera was still sitting on the ground under the beech tree hulling walnuts.'), the events of this scene and the one before it are suddenly thrown into perspective. Connections are also established between the details and characters of this scene in Aunt Virginia's bedroom and other sections of the novel. We are made to feel, for example, the essential difference between Claiborne's aunt and his wife. His aunt is preoccupied with the past, with sentimental tales about herself and with the fictitious value of the Claiborne name. Vera, whatever her limitations of talent and intellect (she neither writes nor thinks deep thoughts), is alive; for whether she lives in the Auvergne in France or Bucks County, Pennsylvania, she enjoys life and takes pleasure in gardening, in tending cattle, or in crushing the hulls of walnuts. Moreover, certain details in that first scene, which takes place before Claiborne goes to his aunt's bedroom and which included what seemed merely gratuitous details about Tom's father, are now charged with significance....

Whatever Claiborne's father's faults, he was at least alive to the simple natural pleasures of the world... The elder Claiborne's faults were the result perhaps of too much passion for life. We are made aware by this sudden illuminating detail that, despite his dislike of his aunt, who bores him, Claiborne is very much like her. He too is an invalid. He too has cut himself off from the natural world and retreated into a world that is artificial, intellectual, and sterile....

The technique of *The Malefactors* is impressive not only because Miss Gordon has accomplished something that is difficult to do but, more important, because the technique is beautifully suited to the story she is telling. Indeed, without this technique--the special combination of the central intelligence with the juxtapositioning and patterning of motifs--the story of Thomas Claiborne could only have ended ironically. As it is, however, Miss Gordon has managed to accommodate both Claiborne's 'Waste Land' vision and Vera's Christian one by allowing Claiborne's to dominate during the early chapters of the novel while having the other gradually assume dominance....

There is...one character who does more to establish the dominance of the Christian point of view than anyone else in the novel--Catherine Pollard, who is something of a saint. Miss Gordon suggests this saintliness in a number of different ways, chiefly by letting us see the kind of person she is now and what she used to be. When Claiborne knew her years before in Paris, she was a drunken, irresponsible young woman married to his cousin George Crenfew. Even in that condition Catherine was able to see that there was nothing she could do to save her marriage. She left her husband and child and entered the Church. When Claiborne meets her again at his wife's festival in Pennsylvania, Catherine is a kind of Catholic lay sister running a hostel in the Bowery. Catherine Pollard has not taken this job because she feels she ought to: she has taken it out of boundless love for the outcasts who stumble in from the streets....

The attraction Claiborne feels for Catherine Pollard is a sign of his unconscious attraction to the religious life which he cannot admit to or even realize during much of the novel. As the action moves toward its close, this attraction becomes so strong that Catherine Pollard appears in Claiborne's dream and is eventually responsible for leading him into the Church. The reason for this increasing power of Catherine Pollard is then revealed. As soon as she had heard about his and Vera's difficulties, she had begun praying

for him. In making Claiborne's change of character depend so heavily on a supernatural explanation, Miss Gordon is aware that she is taking leave of realistic conventions. She does not, however, insist that Catherine Pollard's prayers have wrought this change; she merely presents the facts and lets us make the generalizations for ourselves. Also, as another important way of making Claiborne's conversion convincing, she uses a technique employed in her earlier novels, the historical paradigm, but the paradigms now come from Catholic history. The most important of these religious paradigms is St. Eustace, a Roman general who was converted when the stag he was hunting turned at bay and he saw Christ hanging on the cross between its horns. He then 'refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods so they threw him and his family to the lions...who lay down and licked their feet.' Then St. Eustace and his family were imprisoned in a bull made of brass and burnt to death.

The connection between St. Eustace and the characters in *The Malefactors* is established in several ways. There is, first of all, Vera's bull who might be said to symbolize the masculine principle in its purely natural state. What Bud, the bull, does depends in large part on whether he is controlled and used by man. Blind, uncontrolled masculine power, if unchecked by humility and love, is deadly and destructive. For a time, it appears that Claiborne himself will cast his lot with those of this world who might be said to be worshippers of pagan gods and modern minotaurs.

This possibility is suggested overtly by Claiborne's attitude towards Vera's bull. When the bull gets into the Hess's pasture where two heifers are grazing and, in the neighbor's view, spoils them, Claiborne comments to himself, 'a bull raping a heifer.... But what are bulls--and heifers--for?' The use of the word *rape* makes the point; for, by using it, Claiborne puts himself in the same category of those for whom mating is not a natural act but one of violence. In a moment of drunkenness, he seduces Cynthia Vail (who, it turns out later, has led him on); and, through her, he finds himself increasingly aligned with those who worship the twin gods of contemporary paganism: fame and money.

The explicit connection between St. Eustace and Claiborne is made by Max Shull, a painter who lives with the Claibornes. Shull, who had painted St. Eustace and the stag many years ago, is now, under the encouragement of Catherine Pollard, working on a mural for her chapel. Though Max has failed conspicuously as a painter, even Claiborne is amazed at the power of this mural. Also, Max's painting has managed to attract the interest of a number of young people, including Vera's bachelor brother Robin and George Crenfew's homely daughter Desiree; and it gives both of them something in this world worth devoting themselves to.

In addition to the paradigm of St. Eustace, Miss Gordon also depends upon the example of St. Catherine of Siena and her friend Blessed Ramon. The reference to St. Catherine is made by the nun, Sister Immaculata, who has discovered significant connections between the blood imagery in St. Catherine's writing and that in the poetry of Horne Watts. [They] were experimenting with magic that they believed would enable them to witness the creation of the universe in a mixture of consecrated wine and water. Despite Watts's well-known depravities, Sister Immaculata thinks that Watts was close to a religious conversion at the time of his suicide. Since Watts's death, Catherine Pollard has prayed for his soul; and, judging from the fact that it is Watts who appears in Claiborne's dream and leads him to Catherine Pollard, it seems that her prayers have been efficacious.

The connection between Horne Watts and Thomas Claiborne is also significant in the development of Claiborne's conversion. Claiborne thought highly of Watts's poetry but he felt superior to him because of his lack of formal education, his alcoholism, and his homosexuality. What the reader sees is that Claiborne himself is becoming an alcoholic and that, like Watts, his poetic power has faded. Moreover, though he is not homosexual, his affair with Cynthia Vail is a kind of perversion. Like Horne Watts, Claiborne also moves to the brink of suicide. The parallels linking St. Catherine of Siena and Blessed Ramon to Catherine Pollard and Horne Watts and then, later, Catherine Pollard to Thomas Claiborne function like motifs--they are not meant to convince through cause and effect but to lead the reader to make the connections for himself: If a saintly woman named Catherine can influence the life of a poet in Italy in the fourteenth century, why cannot a saintly woman named Catherine in 1956 influence a poet in New York City?

Miss Gordon's paradigms from religious history are reinforced by others from contemporary life, including persons who are still alive. Horne Watts is certainly based on Hart Crane with whom the Tates were closely associated in the 1920's and 1930's. Catherine Pollard is evidently modeled on Dorothy Day, who still operates a Catholic mission in the Bowery district of New York City. The Claibornes are clearly based on Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate. Carlo Vincent, Vera's eccentric father, was suggested apparently by the equally eccentric Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. And there are doubtless a number of other characters in this novel who have been based on actual persons....

There is no good reason why critics should be disconcerted by *The Malefactors* [as a *roman a clef*]. It is not even a very autobiographical novel, for Miss Gordon has simply availed herself of the large facts from the lives of her contemporary paradigms and has invoked these as she has historical paradigms and for much the same reasons. They are her 'proofs' that, contrary to modern prejudice against mystical experiences, the things she has happen in her novels can happen. Indeed, since they have happened, Miss Gordon depends upon this factual authority to help give her fiction credibility. In order to convince rather than to confess Miss Gordon has invoked familiar figures from the present and from the recent past.

Thomas Claiborne's first meeting with Catherine Pollard occurs early in the novel, and at that time he feels mysteriously drawn to travel somewhere with her. But not until the close of the book do Claiborne and Catherine meet again and is Claiborne finally ready to accompany her on that journey. There are at least two significant reasons for this long delay. First, Claiborne must suffer and learn what that journey means. The second reason--and it is in large part a matter of fictional strategy--is that Claiborne and Catherine Pollard must be kept apart until both the need for and the meaning of that journey can be established. Indeed, we might conclude that almost everything that lies between Claiborne's two meetings with Catherine Pollard exists primarily to establish these two objectives.

In order to make the reader feel the need, even the necessity, for Claiborne to find the true way, Miss Gordon has also to meet and to answer the doubts that many readers are likely to have. The most important of these is the common view that religious mysticism necessarily means a lack of concern for the welfare of others. Another is the belief that the need for religious faith is a sign of weakness. The first question is raised implicitly in the contrast between Virginia Claiborne, Tom Claiborne's aunt, and Catherine Pollard. When Virginia Claiborne was young she had joined the Methodist Church and worked in the Epworth League. Her interest in the church was merely social, for there was nothing else at the time for an unmarried young woman to do. As soon as she moved to the city, Virginia's interest shifted to the study of law; and she passed the bar examinations and practiced law for ten years. Then she gave that up for the more comfortable life of an invalid.

Catherine Pollard, on the other hand, went into the Catholic Church because she was earnestly, passionately seeking God. When she had found what she was looking for, she did not settle into self-complacency; she devoted her life to 'being Christ' to her fellow man. Joining the church, then, does not mean a selfish preoccupation with the saving of her own soul. Personal problems may lead one into the Church; but, after one has crossed that threshold and is himself secure, he has an opportunity to assist others.

Another attitude Miss Gordon appears to be challenging in this novel is the commonly heard complaint that religion is a crutch for the man or woman who cannot solve his own problems. This criticism is implicitly answered in the contrast between Virginia Claiborne and Catherine Pollard, and it is pointedly attacked in the parallels and contrasts between Max Shull, the failed painter who lives on Vera's farm, and Horne Watts, the young poet who committed suicide. Shull is still living, getting a little fat, and puttering around with his paints. Watts, on the other hand, enjoyed a brief but hectic career as a poet. In the middle of his life, he threw himself from the deck of a steamer into the sea. Miss Gordon makes it clear that, while there are some obvious similarities between Horne Watts and Max Shull (both artists, both homosexuals), there are also some crucial differences.

Shull enjoys his effeminacy, whereas Watts rejected his and tried to be masculine. Moreover, Horne Watts was filled with 'passionate intensity,' not for himself, but for life, for man, and ultimately for God. The point Miss Gordon is making in the parallels between Shull and Watts is stated by Sister Immaculata

who quotes Christ: 'Some men are born eunuchs, some men are made eunuchs by men and some become eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God.' A religious conversion, contrary to the popular view, can be a heroic struggle that involves self-discipline and self-sacrifice; whereas living outside the church can mean, as Max Shull illustrates, a pitiful weakness.

There is in *The Malefactors* a great deal of emphasis upon sex, particularly upon sexual perversions, a fact which surprised Miss Gordon herself when it came to her attention; for, as she remarked, she does not usually deal with such matters. In a novel such as *The Malefactors*, however, which attempts to grapple with the anti-religious bent of our times, attitudes toward sex, particularly the question of sexual perversion, have to be dealt with. Miss Gordon has Claiborne remark of Marcia Crenfew's Freudianism--a remark that could be applied generally to these times--'You've got it turned upside down.' In other words, what passes for love in our society is, at best, sex, and, at its worst, often perversion; and what is called perversion (or 'sexual maladjustment') is often love, sometimes love of the highest order. The problem of sex is, therefore, deeply involved in the more general question about whether religion is a retreat from reality.

Miss Gordon has made it clear both in print and out that she does not approve of homosexuality. In *The Malefactors*, she puts that vice in perspective as one of many human vices. For some, vice is drink; for others, lechery, greed, or unfettered ambition. There is also that modern vice, the desire to reduce all human relationships to the mechanics of sex. The desire to mechanize love and passion for money, Miss Gordon sees as intimately related. She dramatizes this connection in a scene that takes place during Vera's festival. A young man in a white refrigerated truck appears dressed in the white garb of the medical scientist. He is the representative of a company specializing in artificial insemination, and he delivers a spiel to Vera's guests about the advantages in cattle breeding of artificial insemination. The young man spouts the jargon of science, but what he is really doing, of course, is delivering a sales pitch for his product. All of the advantages this salesman gives relate to but one argument--money.

The objections against artificial insemination are put into the mouth of an old Dunkard, Ed Applekeller, who is also a shrewd farmer: '*As a beast of the field I am with Thee all the day.* The cattle was put here for a picture of ourselves. It's up to us to guide 'em and use 'em, the way the Lord does us, but only according to what's right... [artificial insemination] is against nature. Cattle have got their nature same as a man's got his nature. It's up to a man to respect it.' Vera too is outraged by such cruelty perpetrated on dumb animals, but Claiborne is only amused. He is, as we have seen, also amused when Vera's prize bull gets into a neighbor's pasture and 'rapes' two cows. Miss Gordon's point is that the mating of animals is part of the natural order, but it is not what animals are 'for' any more than rape is what women are for. To say otherwise is to embrace what is ultimately a perverted view of life.

Despite Claiborne's refusal to take seriously Vera's objections to artificial insemination or to regard the sexual problems of animals with anything but a cynical view, Claiborne himself takes violent exception to certain intellectual perversions of man's sexual nature. The chief practitioner of this cult is George Crenfew's second wife, Marcia, a small, chinless woman who takes satisfaction in reducing the complexities of art and life to Freudian simplicities. For example, when Marcia and Claiborne are looking at a piece of sculpture constructed out of junk by Vera's brother Robin, an overaged bachelor, Marcia makes an asinine comment on Robin's sculpture: 'Interesting isn't it that he puts such a limitation on himself? Makes the phallic concentration all the more obvious.'

In another work of art, this time a painting of a religious subject by Max Shull, Marcia finds the whole sad story of the painter's homosexuality. When Catherine tells her that the title of the painting is *The Vision of St. Eustace* and that the erection between the horns of the bull is a cross and not a phallus, Marcia smiles. 'Can't the cross be a phallic symbol?' she inquires sweetly. At this point, Claiborne loses control of himself and makes what is clearly the author's own view of a common attitude toward religion and sex: '*No! No!*' Claiborne cries. 'She's got it upside down: They stood her on her head twenty years ago and she's never got right side up. It wouldn't be so bad if she was the only one, but we've got factories turning her out by the hundreds.'

Claiborne's deep emotional opposition to Marcia's perverted vision is pictured even more forcefully in an argument he has with her several days later while on a commuter train going into New York City. On this occasion Marcia has managed to turn Baudelaire's great poem *Le Reve Parisien* into the manifestations of a trauma suffered by the poet when he discovered his parents 'in coitus.' 'If you were my wife,' he tells her, 'I'd hang you up by your heels till all the crap drained out of you--if it took the rest of your life.' The point of this scene, though it is not made explicitly, is that Marcia Crenfrew has a typically modern but incorrect view of art. Whatever trauma Baudelaire may have suffered, his art, particularly the stanzas quoted by Marcia, arises from much deeper levels of the mind that she is aware of. Baudelaire's poetry, like all great art, springs from the soul and expresses, in images drawn from the unconscious, universal truths.

Though Claiborne is gifted with a poet's vision, he lacks the ability to keep himself from falling into the chasm that yawns at his feet and at those of every mortal: he allows himself to be seduced by Cynthia Vail. The affair of Claiborne and Cynthia develops on a somewhat higher level some of the same points Miss Gordon has been making in the sections of the novel dealing with natural mating, with artificial insemination, and with homosexual and Freudian perversion. According to standards rather widely held in our society, there is nothing at all unnatural in the affair of Claiborne and Cynthia Vail. He is tired of his wife; she of her husband. She is attracted to Claiborne; he, to her. Why shouldn't they then sleep together?

Miss Gordon, of course, does not deal with the question of uninhibited sexual experiences in such general terms. She is concerned with two specific people and with certain specific backgrounds, attitudes, and characters; but what she says about this relationship has applicability to human conduct generally. The fault to be found with this relationship is quite simply that it is not founded on love. Claiborne's attraction to Cynthia is a product of lust and pride; for, after all, Cynthia admires and looks up to Claiborne as a great poet. Vera does not worship Claiborne's public image; she loves him. Because Cynthia does not love him (she does not apparently love anyone but herself), she makes no demands on him; she liberates him in a curious way from the ties that bind most men to their fellow creatures.

Like all of Miss Gordon's villains, Cynthia has no standards, no code of conduct, no theory of life except her own ambitions. As a consequence, she does not hesitate to take the most convenient view of everyone she knows. Cynthia's cynicism makes Claiborne feel that he has joined her on a strange quest (one very different from the lighthearted journey promised by Catherine Pollard), 'in some vast cavern underground, their only light the torch which played now on this marmoreal figure, now on that, figures whose pose, whose features seemed at first glance familiar but which in the gleam of the torch held up in her frail hand, would suddenly lean forward in an attitude never assumed in life, emit from under shadowy brows looks never leveled on fellow mortals.'

On Cynthia's part (we don't see her fully since everything in the novel comes through Claiborne's point of view), the relationship is strictly one of convenience and usefulness. Since Cynthia wants to be a good poet and to publish in important places, Claiborne, a good poet and still a fine critic, can open important doors for her. She gives him her body in return for the favors he can do for her; and, when she is through with him, she moves to another man who has more money and who is in a position to back her publishing schemes. For Cynthia, in other words, the relationship with Claiborne is simply a form of prostitution and therefore a perversion.

For Claiborne, the affair with Cynthia is a form of self-indulgence, self-deception, and evasion. He has turned his back on Vera because she demands something from him that is difficult, almost impossible, for him to give--himself. This limitation is something that, in the course of the novel, Claiborne finally recognizes. When he has accepted that knowledge, he is then faced with the very difficult task of giving himself to Vera. And his is not, Miss Gordon shows, a slavish devotion; on the contrary, it requires, first of all, that he become master in his own house and learn to impose his will with wisdom.

If Vera may be said to represent the true way for Claiborne, Cynthia Vail represents the false way. Miss Gordon reinforces the choices represented by Vera and Cynthia by associating Vera with the sun and Cynthia with the moon. Vera is usually outside in the fields or in the midst of some homely activity such as caring for her cattle or arranging for her festival. Her affection for Claiborne is offered in the open daylight. Cynthia's first covert advance to Claiborne is made on a moonlit night when she lays a hand on his arm,

and Claiborne 'could feel its chill through his thin coat sleeve. A drop of water fell on the gravel between them. He put his own hand up and laid it for a second over her cold hand, then looked up to see where the moon had gone.' And Cynthia's influence over Claiborne is likened, as we have seen, to a journey through dark caverns lighted only by a torch carried in her frail hand.

This exotic imagery is the author's way of suggesting that what Cynthia offers to Claiborne is not love and natural affection but a subterranean existence beautiful with a borrowed elegance that is coldly calculated to achieve its effect--to make Cynthia Vail appear in the best possible light and, consequently, to help her rise in the literary world. In contrast, when Vera offers Claiborne herself, all she asks in return is his love. Vera's demand on Claiborne is, of course, almost more than he can bear; for Claiborne himself lives in the underground world where Cynthia is too much at home. When Cynthia smiles on him and takes him into her confidence by laying bare some of the sordid details about her own and Vera's family, Claiborne is delighted; for he has never before known a woman who was less inhibited by the rules with which most people govern their lives. Vera never gossips about her family and never judges her father's eccentric behavior, but Cynthia unabashedly tells Claiborne that her mother divorced her father in order to marry a man with money. She also reveals to Claiborne secrets about Vera's family, particularly about her father's last years, his narcissism and his suicide.

Vera's father, Carlo Vincent, or Vencenzi as his name was before he anglicized it, is closely related thematically to both Cynthia and Claiborne. Cynthia clearly shares her uncle's preoccupation with self; but Claiborne, who detests Carlo's painting, also resembles him. For Claiborne too is absorbed with himself, or as his 'voice' tells him when he asks himself whether Vera will come back to him: '*There isn't anything to go back to*'... Claiborne's absorption is heavily underscored by the major technique of the novel, the device of the central intelligence which permits us to see everything through his eyes. His preoccupation with himself also appears directly in his blindness to Vera's feeling for him, in his ability to love or to think well of other people ('I hate my fellow men,' he tells Vera) in his frequent conversations with his inner voice, and even in his affair with Cynthia (for in her admiration of his poetic judgment she is but a reflection of him)--all of these are manifestations of Claiborne's ingrown sensibility. The dangers that lie open before him are dramatized by the several dreams in which he finds himself running in company with Carlo Vincent and Horne Watts, both of whom were alcoholic, homosexual, and ultimately suicides.

Though Claiborne's dream would be given a Freudian reading by Marcia Crenflew and though Claiborne himself thinks of its purely sexual implications, Miss Gordon supplies another meaning. She has George Crenflew say of one dream, that it is perhaps a warning to Claiborne of what could happen to him unless he alters his course, for he too is heading toward self-destruction. Significantly, Horne Watts, who fought heroically to escape the prison of his flesh, appears in Claiborne's final dream and leads him to Catherine Pollard, who exemplifies the highest kind of love of which man is capable. And it is Catherine Pollard, as we have seen, who points out to Claiborne the way to save himself.

This account of Tom Claiborne's salvation through reunion with his wife resembles Jim Chapman's reconciliation with his wife in *Women on the Porch*, but without the important difference that the whole tradition of Catholic belief has now provided a basis for the reconciliation. The meaning of Claiborne's reunion with Vera is not just that he has been saved from the hell of his paralyzed conditions but that he has also been redeemed from the hell of Christian myth [reality]. This meaning will not be enthusiastically received by skeptical critics, but it is one that can hardly be ignored in any serious readings of the novel. Unlike some Catholic writers, notably J. F. Powers and Flannery O'Connor, who approach their faith through ambiguities and negations [O'Connor is *very* clear in expressing her faith, especially in her two novels about Christian prophets, not "ambiguous."] Miss Gordon is quite direct; indeed, her indirections are deliberate fictional strategies and not emotional ambiguities.

The Malefactors was probably not written as an answer to those for whom the meaninglessness of existence is the main truth, rather than the chief myth of our age; but to read it in this light adds to our understanding of this novel. Miss Gordon's early fiction, as we have seen, would have no part of this myth. The fictional worlds created in her novels were dominated by those who acted, either for themselves or in the name of an ideal. There were no paralyzed, suffering heroes; when there was suffering it was presented as something to be endured as part of man's inevitable lot. The protagonists of these novels were old-

fashioned heroes, identified with some remote time and culture. *The Malefactors*, like *Women on the Porch* and *Strange Children*, takes on the modern myth, admits that fear and paralysis are possible attributes of a fictional protagonist, but insists that a hero must still oppose the enemy--in this case, the hero's own darker self. Miss Gordon's religious commitments also make it possible, perhaps demand, that her new hero have with him a 'large presence' to lift and sustain him on his perilous journey through life."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 94-111

"In *The Malefactors*, imaginative projection concludes Tom's psychological crisis. Driving back from an unsuccessful attempt to persuade his estranged wife to return and live with him, Claiborne nearly collides with a gasoline truck. Conjuring up the fire that could have ensued, he confronts his own death in a revelatory hallucination; the flames he imagines signal his reintegration, becoming through Gordon's powerful and allusive prose, a purgatorial fire....

A matrix for regeneration, symbolically uniting the male and female principles of reason and intuition, marriage--like art--is a life's work, but one consecrated by a vow. The climactic reunion of husband and wife, as plot and as metaphor, discloses the protagonists' new wisdom. Growing out of egocentricity and an unhealthy, though fashionable, schism between feeling and thought, the central female and male characters mature when they realize that the bond between them promises love and a purpose to life, not dreary duty or entrapment. Thus, these couples recognize the beauty and significance of the mundane and transcend this world, not by ignoring it or seeking escape, but by seeing in the objects and the experiences of this physical existence the possibilities of spiritual order. Ultimately, each individual is able to appreciate a larger mystery, to feel love for others, and to participate in a community....

As in *The Strange Children*, to recover creativity and revitalize relationships the artist in *The Malefactors* (1956) must fully develop his ability as seer. In much of the imagery and in the similarity of Tom Claiborne to Jim Chapman, *The Malefactors* is also akin to *The Women on the Porch*. Although the narration is strictly limited to Tom Claiborne's perspective, the techniques in *The Malefactors* resemble those in the two previous novels; they are well suited to reveal an individual's growth towards a more encompassing vision of the world. With her emphasis on point of view and the visionary--both of which interests are united in her examination of the artist's role--it follows that Caroline Gordon would be intrigued by the relationship between fiction and painting. *The Malefactors* most explicitly lays bare the connections, for Tom's maturing imagination and understanding of the world are compared to the development not only of the poet Horne Watts but also of two actual painters--Carlo Vincent, Tom's now deceased father-in-law, and Max Shull. Her predilection for painting, indeed her own gift as a painter, gives Caroline Gordon long and careful practice in recognizing a significant scene and rendering it through well-chosen details....

Carlo Vincent is surely guilty of...confusion about his proper role as artist. We learn that in the years before his suicide, he painted self-portraits... 'In the nude, or mostly in the nude... In one he's St. George fighting the dragon...naked.' Tom surmises that Carlo himself realized that he 'took the wrong turn...or he wouldn't have left orders for those later pictures to be burned.' Like the writer in 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!' Carlo Vincent's problem is self-absorption. Tom compares the painter's narcissism to looking in a mirror... Another artist figure in the novel commits suicide when he takes the wrong turn in his writing. Horne Watts, the poet whose career very explicitly parallels that of Hart Crane, is a homosexual whose search for relationship has repeatedly been unsuccessful... 'He was trying to find God'... Gordon's effort 'is to effectively "place" homosexuality...in the context of a larger agony--man's eternal search for wholeness.' Horne's dabbling in magic is further evidence of his misdirected search for the divine, for the power that could make him whole....

As devout as he was in his service, Horne sacrificed on the wrong altar. Caroline Gordon patently exposes this kind of error in 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!' where she asserts that 'an artist's first duty is the same as any other man's--to serve, praise and worship God.' Tom's dream of Horne Watts and Carlo Vincent links these two figures to his search for renewed creativity. As Tom recounts his dream to his cousin George, the psychiatrist, Tom is slowly making his way into a dark cave in which Horne and Carlo run before him, when he meets his father sitting beside a cliff to warn him 'from going over the edge.' Tom

looks over the precipice and sees Horne and Carlo lying below, their heads torn off by the fall... In an image that is drawn from an early Tate poem--two lines of which are later quoted by George--the father's head was transparent... Tom tells George that if he had not awakened, his father would have torn off Tom's head because it, too, seemed to be full of worms.

Correspondingly, in Tate's poem 'Homily' (1925), the speaker urges the listener to throw away his 'tired unspeaking head'.... Tate's poem begins with an invocation to 'Didactic laurel'...a symbol of Apollo [god of reason] and 'a poetry located in reason.' Escaping reason, Caroline Gordon's protagonist enters the cave in his dream 'by pushing aside a growth of laurel.' Usually so dependent on his intellect, Tom finds that in his desperation to restore his creativity he has succumbed to a kind of madness. His repressed subconscious assaults him in dreams and hallucinations, and his reason and emotions appear to be warring. When we first meet him, drinking has already exaggerated Tom's cynical and critical tendencies and encouraged indulgence in self-pity and depression. His wife Vera does not know how to help him....

He resents Vera, complaining that when they married she thought that he 'could change the whole world.' Yet what really distresses Tom is that Vera in effect abandoned him once she recognized his stagnation. Some time after he has left Vera to live with the poet Cynthia Vail, Tom tells George that it was actually Vera who left him one evening in 1934 because 'I haven't been going anywhere in a long time, and my wife knows it.' Thus, Tom's lack of direction has prevented them from any real intimacy. The couple has never had a child, nor until George mentions it, has it ever occurred to Tom that his wife might want a family. Instead, Vera has diverted her energies to raising cattle, with her prize bull as her surrogate child.

As with Jim Chapman in *The Women on the Porch*, Tom's problems with his wife and his trouble writing are reflected in his distorted perceptions. When we enter Jim's mind the night that he spends drinking in the city, we become aware of realities he ordinarily suppresses: so, too, with Tom. Examining his emerging subconscious, we see the spiritual crisis he must resolve. In nearly every chapter of Part I, which takes place on September 22, 1946, the day of Vera's fair, Tom is taking a drink: to brace himself for what he expects to be a disagreeable meeting, he goes into a bar before he meets Cynthia at the train station; he takes a drink before he visits his bedridden aunt Virginia; he gets drunk at his own dinner party that night, and continues to drink when some of the company go to see Max's studio on the premises. Tom really does seem to hate his fellow men; he attempts to anesthetize himself to any encounter or exchange.

Ironically, by releasing his memories, the drinking reveals the patterns that have shaped his present meaningless life, but the imagery also implies Tom's recovery. Like Jim Chapman in *The Women on the Porch*, Tom feels that he and his acquaintances who suffer the same spiritual crisis are on the edge of a precipice or chasm; he conceives of himself in hell; and he compares his condition to that of the unhappy poet in the *Pervigilium Veneris*. Eventually, however, an awareness of his plight leads Tom to correct it. Further reinforcing our hope for Tom, the imagery of the cave, which was introduced in *The Strange Children*, is developed here. First a symbol of the 'deaf unconscious,' the cave becomes the locus of insight, as is Plato's cave, and finally a place of worship as the dark chapel of Saint Eustace suggests.

Although Tom resolves to change his condition, he first makes another wrong turn. From a former writer Catherine Pollard--a character Gordon based on Dorothy Day--Tom could learn how to make recompense for his failures. Since Catherine's conversion, she has started a home for vagrants on the Bowery and several communal farms. When she visits Blencker's Brook for Vera's celebration, Tom is drawn to her, intrigued by the changes in her and sensitive to the power that she commands... He senses that she could help him....

Catherine Pollard [is] 'spiritually central to the novel...even though the skeptical poet Tom Claiborne is the central intelligence.' Indeed, the conflict in the novel is Tom's skeptical resistance to faith: he must acknowledge, as his name suggests, that he is mortal, and to transcend his plight he must accept divine grace. Illustrating this theme, Ashley Brown shows the important parallels between the novel and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, more specifically *The Purgatorio*--both works 'with a central intelligence, a character whose perception brings the scenes into focus and thus allows him to arrive at a proper revelation.'

However, as Tom's behavior with Catherine exemplifies, he resists his religious impulses so strongly that months pass before he yields to them. In the exchange with Catherine in the garden, we see that Tom knows the way to recovery but habitually suppresses or distorts this knowledge. Catherine recalls how he helped her when she discovered that she had no talent for writing and asked him what she should do: 'You said, "Anything! Get drunk. Join the Church...."' Many years ago, as now, Tom could direct a friend to religion but he seems incapable of taking his own advice. By the end of the day of the fair, more accurately at four o'clock the next morning when he suddenly awakes in Vera's bedroom, Tom is already too enthralled with Cynthia Vail to think very long about Catherine's route to salvation.

Unfortunately, Tom does not realize the import of his involvement with this other woman whose name associates her with the sinister powers of the moon. Turning his back on his sleeping wife, Tom gazes about the room, perceiving that a 'bunch of clothes there on the floor looked like a body, sodden and fallen in some dark encounter. Something curled like a worm lay at a little distance from one limp sleeve.' That wormlike object, the withered spray of lavender that Cynthia had handed to him earlier, as well as the bunched clothes, forebode Tom's undoing. Increasingly preoccupied with Cynthia, he rises from bed and walks out on the balcony: 'The moon must just have gone down....' His affair with Cynthia Vail is such a false dawn. Tom attempts to infuse himself with creativity by becoming intimate with this young poet and by associating with other literati--in this specific case, a group of selfish and pretentious intellectuals.

Tom's efforts to revitalize his own potency are grotesquely analogous to the artificial insemination advertised at the fair. At the dinner party the evening of the fete, Tom had voiced his disapproval of such mechanical means of reproduction and accused a neighbor Joe Hess, who endorses all such scientific advances, of being not a farmer but an alchemist--someone who wants 'something for nothing.' In a sense, Tom also wants something for nothing, but he is as doomed to fail as Horne Watts, who tried to write poetry by getting drunk... By eluding his conscious self temporarily, Horne could reach creative sources that seemed to have become dissociated from him. Yet this method of composition worked in only a limited way: although it supplied Horne with a few valuable lines for his poems, in the two years before his death he had written just 'one short lyric.'

Tom experiences a similar splitting of his psyche. As he plunges into madness, he is aware of a voice that generally checks his destructive impulses. When, for example, Tom grows angry at Ed Archer during the dinner party and fantasizes about beating *'the living daylight out of him,'* a voice argues with him: 'He looked about the table cautiously. They were all madder than he--he had no doubt of that--but it was hardly likely that they heard as many voices, or rather, that they heard one voice so often. It was always one voice.' Throughout the novel such incidents are common, and what could be interpreted as internal debate begins to seem more and more like auditory hallucination. In a way, though, Tom is saner than many of his friends. The voice is, at least metaphorically, his subconscious pleading for help... It seeks to compensate for Tom's inadequacies and to show him a means of recovery: thus, the importance of his dreams and other extrarational proddings which lead to his eventual reconciliation with Vera and the quieting of his religious conscience.

Tom's uneasiness with religion has been fostered by his father. Until Tom can accept this man whom he has despised so much but emulated nonetheless, he is himself a rather despicable character. Whereas his cousin George, who spent his boyhood summers with Tom, remembers Mr. Claiborne as the foster father who taught him about heroes, Tom calls his father, 'A roisterer and a whoremonger...[who] never did an honest day's work in his life.' George suggests, however, that Tom's problem is not the usual Oedipal conflict. Helping him interpret the dream of the cave, George posits, 'Maybe your father thinks you're *too* bright.... Maybe that's why he wants you to throw your head over the cliff.'

Tom's father not only disrespected the women in his life--neglecting his wife and satisfying his sexual passions by frequenting the whorehouse in town or taking up with one of the black women on the estate--he also encouraged Tom to disdain religion. As a child, Tom feared his father's ridicule of church-going... Unawares, Tom is becoming increasingly like the father he could not respect. He is drinking too much and, even worse, leaves his wife to carry on an adulterous affair. Unable to forgive his father for his faults, Tom perpetuates them in his own behavior. Only in the dream of the cave does he realize that his father has always cared for him and is now warning him away from a destructive course.

Tom needs balance. The near madness that throws him into emotional and mental chaos has been caused by an excess of rationality, by an attempt to deny the love and spirituality he needs to nurture his creative, whole self. In urging Tom to seek out Vera at Catherine Pollard's farm, George wisely locates the source of Tom's psychic balance in his relationship with his wife. The union between Vera's emotional, mainly intuitive character and Tom's more cerebral one will be mutually tempering. In the words of the novel's epigraph, 'It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears'.... This quotation from Jacques Maritain's 'The Frontiers of Poetry' means that the human soul must reconcile its reasoning powers with its intuitive ones.... The critical intelligence determines 'the authenticity of what the soul (Eve) experiences.' Thus, Tom must move from delusion to revelation--using his reason as the proper mediator and interpreter of non-rational experience. This reconciliation between the mind and soul takes place on a symbolic level in marriage, especially in such traditional archetypal schemes as Caroline Gordon portrays, in which the woman's intuition and biological fecundity balance the man's rationality and capacity for work.

The one artist whose progress in the novel roughly corresponds to Tom's is Max Shull, another friend and former lover of Horne Watts. Max lives with the Claibornes and, like Tom, has ceased to be productive, though he does not seem anxious about that. As Tom observes, 'Now that Max no longer took his painting seriously he wanted a party every day.' However, Max's disposition is essentially religious. Despite his initial choice of a shallow and unsatisfying life, there are implications that Max will find his way back, for he seems haunted by religion. For example, in the days when he and Horne were lovers, they both chose patron saints. Max selected Saint Cyprian, the former magician, and named his studio after him. His current studio on the Claibornes' land is also named 'St. Cyprian's Oratory'. Although Max has not painted anything recently, his earlier religious painting of Saint Eustace's conversion is displayed at Vera's fair, which takes place on that saint's day.

These allusions to conversion foreshadow Max's eventual change of behavior. When Tom runs into him again--not having seen Max since he left Vera--Max is coming into Catherine Pollard's flophouse on the Bowery where Tom has just finished talking with Sister Immaculata. Tom learns that Max is working at present on a mural of Saint Eustace for the chapel on Mott Street, which Catherine and her followers are repairing and refurbishing. Max coaxes Tom into the chapel for a look. There, a number of minor characters who have previously been leading selfish and wasteful lives now...are happily employed in Catherine's program.

Tom is attracted to all this activity, but most of all to the church itself as a center of spirituality. Yet, once he notices two nuns praying before the altar, Claiborne defensively begins to intellectualize, reciting to himself, '*An altar is a raised structure, or any structure or place, on which sacrifices are offered or incense burned in worship of a deity, ancestor, etc....*' Sensing a mystery here in spite of himself, Tom recalls the story of Jacob's ladder.... Tom fights his intuition; in fact, he is so antagonistic towards the influence he feels in the chapel that he runs out before Catherine Pollard can greet him.

The image of the ladder is related to an important symbol in the novel--the bridge. Like Jacob's ladder, the bridge represents the link between heaven and earth, and in Christian terms, that bridge is Christ who is both God and man. As Sister Immaculata tells Tom: 'It's the Humanity of the Word is the bridge between earth and heaven. And it has three steps: the feet that were nailed to the cross, the side that was pierced to reveal the ineffable love of the heart, and the mouth in which gall and vinegar were turned to sweetness. Horne ran to and fro among creatures like a madman, but he ran along the bridge too, else how could he have brought back the stones of virtue that he planted in his garden?'... Caroline Gordon calls our attention to the life of Hart Crane and to his poetry, not simply to give us insight into this celebrated and sometimes infamous poet whose suicide astounded the literary world, but to dramatize the spiritual quest of the times.

Likewise, Ashley Brown holds that the novel is not to be read merely as a *roman à clef*. As in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the dead characters are made 'as important as the living' to show that 'the possibilities of saintliness and malefaction have been fully realized in our time as in any other....it is Miss Gordon's intention to place these characters from 'life' in a fictional situation larger than the ones they have actually occupied and thus to make them more than the subject of literary gossip.

To illustrate Gordon's condemnation of such malefaction and contemporary false faiths, Vivienne Koch lists all the camps that are criticized in the novel: science and scientism, Freudian and neo-Freudian thought, aestheticism and fake aestheticism, antihumanism and commercialism, pride of intellect and worldliness, 'higher' education and 'progressive' higher education. These social or intellectual fads do not provide meaning. Value resides in the archetypal truth of the bridge as symbol. The poet as pontifex--also the title of Horne Watts's volume--builds his own structures of words to direct us towards that meaning. Just so, Hart Crane viewed the bridge, the central image of his important long poem, as 'an act of faith besides being a communication.'

By the end of the novel, Tom Claiborne, the reborn poet, shows us the bridges between this world and spiritual reality. Through his purging vision of the fire and the dream that later sends him to Catherine for help, Tom is able to become a 'bridge-maker'--if not as exalted a leader as the pontifex of the Roman Catholic church, at least a caring husband and a responsible writer. Vision is coupled with proper action, and as in 'Atlantis,' the final poem of Crane's *The Bridge*, the divine power at work in the mundane world now gives direction to the human soul and body.... A 'communication' of an individual's arrival at faith, the novel itself points towards a metaphysical truth by enjoining the reader's participation in the 'experiential knowledge' of conversion, of renewed creativity and communion....

Tom's way is not that of Catherine Pollard, truly the namesake of Saint Catherine of Siena... In *The Malefactors* there is equal glory to those who perceive in marriage a route towards meaningful action. Yet the 'saints' help to guide those who are unsure of their course, for Tom's dream of Catherine finally leads him to his wife. Importantly, it is Horne Watts who points to the woman in the dream; earlier, Tom's father warned his son away from a too cerebral, self-preoccupied existence, and now Tom's poetic mentor provides him with a spiritual counselor. When Tom does find Catherine in Saint Eustace's chapel, she admits that she has been praying for him, just as she has been praying for Horne since his suicide. From Catherine, Tom further discovers that Vera was baptized a Catholic and will be obliged to honor the church's teaching 'that a wife is subject to her husband, as the Church is subject to Christ.' These are the words that send Tom back to Vera.

One aspect of Caroline Gordon's fiction that has been noted and sometimes criticized is her scenic development. Yet this technique is related significantly to her concern with vision. Particularly in the later novels, in order to reveal the sublime, Gordon freezes those moments of perception when phenomenal and noumenal realities are fused. Whether through an omniscient narrator or through the consciousness of one of her characters, this stasis is revelation--that is, superimposed and simultaneous perceptions of spiritual truths and the everyday. Therefore, the climactic resolution of *The Women on the Porch* is Jim's vision of the pioneer, whose values have encouraged spiritual estrangement in the generations inheriting his lust for a new Eden.... *The Malefactors* concludes with Tom's regeneration and his anticipated reunion with his wife. Once the revelation has been received, all subsequent action becomes part of an effort to reconceive the world in terms of the new meaning.

Many critics feel that this scenic quality weakens characterization and plot development, but it may be helpful to compare the progression in Gordon's [Modernist] novels to the psychological and thematic development in such collections of short stories as *Dubliners*, which Gordon admired in her critical writings, or even other contemporary [Modernist] volumes such as *Winesburg, Ohio* or *Go Down, Moses*. In each, seemingly discrete narratives are linked by similar conflicts and themes; the consciousnesses and values of individuals as well as of their communities are explored. Moreover, in *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, there is an artist, or at least a literary man of intelligence and sensibility who perceives around him the many who have failed to find love and meaningful work and who hopes to live differently....

Gordon's predisposition for building such discrete scenes is related to her fascination with moments of vision. Her practice bears some resemblance to her master James Joyce's interest in 'epiphanies.' Like Joyce, Caroline Gordon strives to convert what he has called 'the bread of everyday life' into metaphysical sustenance. Her emphasis on the revelatory scene also presupposes certain technical connections between the novel and drama. Gordon's high regard for Henry James's fiction has encouraged her own close attention to details of scene, gesture, and speech and to the insights into the growing mind that careful narration provides.... Gordon's 'photographic habit'...is, at its best, an indispensable aspect of Gordon's

aesthetic and religious vision.... She is interested in the mind that constructs the frame and in the completeness of the reality that consciousness seeks to define."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 133-48

"*The Malefactors* is primarily the story of Tom Claiborne, a middle-aged poet who embarks on a quest of sorts to reinvigorate his life with meaning and purpose.... Though he does not actively seek out religious conviction, a part of him is receptive to the order and purpose that an active faith would bring.... Tom's egotism and cynicism, however, effectively smother any urge in him for a life of faith and for spiritual salvation, and he never makes any real move towards the Church.... Tom's conversion at the end is purposely abrupt and startling, but unconvincing." [Unconvincing? This critic is an Atheist in denial who finds all religion unconvincing and "out of touch with reality." He wrote his book not to explain Catholic writers but to belittle them. He is like the malefactors in the novel.]

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 105-07, 110

"While she was writing it, Caroline has regarded it as her chef d'oeuvre, her 'big novel,' and she was proud of her use of Henry James's 'later method.' Critics did not remark on her use of this technique, she said, because they did not know what James's later method was. She was proud, too, of the way she, a convert, had written a thoroughly Catholic novel. She told Stark Young she also thought it was the first novel in which the Jungian 'underground' actually provided a setting for action. 'I am a little vain of that passage in which Horne Watts indicates to Claiborne that Catherine Pollard wants to speak to him, but Claiborne finds only a stalactite when he approaches her (in the dream), and has to seek her out and continue the conversation above ground, where they take it up as if it had not been interrupted. That sort of thing is not easily brought off, as you well know'....

Allen expressed admiration for the book many times.... He listed *The Malefactors* among great books that had been underrated. There were some very good reviews.... [Jacques] Maritain wrote that few books had moved him so deeply. It was full of poetry and of admirably sure design. 'The fact of your characters being haunted by real figures very close to us, Hart Crane, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, gives them a very strange dimension and renders them curiously familiar to us. This has nothing to do with the roman a clef. It is rather a use of overtones which seems to me very new and bold and very successful'.... Ashley Brown, who had done his dissertation at Vanderbilt on Caroline's work, [said] the Dantesque scheme...informs *The Malefactors* to a considerable extent'.... He praised the 'controlled point of view, the carefully modulated time shift, the adjustment of style to subject, the precision of details--all of these technical procedures are made to work'.... Caroline was charmed and startled... She said she had not read Dante."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 35-36

"In many ways, *The Malefactors* is a reworking of the themes of 'The Petrified Woman,' *The Strange Children*, and 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!' with supernatural and Jungian overtones. The central consciousness is that of Tom Claiborne, a poet who has written only eight pages in ten years. Although the reader is decoyed by Claiborne's reference to Allen Tate as a poet he used to know, Claiborne is clearly based on Allen in a number of ways, including a friend of his youth, Horne Watts, obviously modeled on Hart Crane. Claiborne's family history, however, is that of the Meriwethers, suggesting that through Claiborne's journey to the Church, Caroline is once again relinquishing her family and the South's burden of the past; all the Claiborne land is now under water as part of a government water program in the same way that Claiborne's dead past will now be reborn in the waters of faith.

Claiborne's wife, Vera, like Mme. Fay of 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!,' resembles Caroline in her circle of lame ducks and her love of the land. The relationship between Claiborne and Vera also has some similarities to that of the Tates, especially Allen's retreats before Caroline's need for reassurance. Claiborne remembers that Vera 'had come to him as to a physician--or a magician. He was to give her everything she

had ever wanted and never got.' Tom Claiborne, like the Tom in 'The Petrified Woman,' wants his wife paralyzed, docile and undemanding: 'If only she had been content to remain what she was when he had found her, a bird fluttering on a terrace that a man might pick up and warm in his bosom, a bird that would nestle tamely, grateful for any warmth it might come by, and not be always turning its fierce golden eye on yours, not always be beating its maimed wing against your breast.'

Vera is more the woman Caroline would like to be than a version of Caroline as she was. Vera wanted to destroy the late paintings of her artist father, in which he posed naked before a mirror... Vera, as her name suggests, represents the path to true art, Christian art; she will serve as Beatrice for her clay-born husband's journey to faith.... Claiborne is aware of the futility of existence on their farm, 'Everybody busy all day long doing nothing.' He keeps hearing a Voice, perhaps supernatural or perhaps the voice of his conscience or better self, which warns him that he is destroying himself, but he wants to suppress it. The fact that Claiborne is at a fork in his life's journey is represented by two women who reappear in his life after years of absence.

Catherine Pollard, based closely on Dorothy Day, visits the farm; she is no longer the libertine Claiborne had known in her youth and he is drawn to her evident saintliness. The attraction of another woman, however, is temporarily stronger. His wife's younger cousin Cynthia comes for a visit and seduces him; perhaps as Caroline perceived Allen seduced by her younger cousin in 1933. As her name suggests, she is fickle and false reflected light, like a mirror or the moon. She attracts him because she does not reflect his true self, but merely flatters his false self as influential man of letters.

When he finally realizes Cynthia's falseness and fears that he is falling apart, Claiborne goes to seek Vera at a place that resembles Dorothy Day's Maryfarm on the Hudson River. He speaks to her, but cannot understand her conversion or her new way of life. As he leaves, an alcoholic priest reminds him that Vera must listen to him because a wife is subject to her husband as the Church is subject to Christ. When he returns to the Chapel of St. Eustace, Catherine Pollard's New York City base, she tells him the same thing. The epigraph for the novel, a line from Jacques Maritain, expresses a similar sentiment: 'It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears.'

These statements are calls for obedience to just authority, which Claiborne cannot claim until he realizes that he is clay born, a malefactor, weakened by original sin like everyman. When his reason is strengthened and revived by faith, it will be able to interpret correctly the imaginative and intuitive messages of his wife or his muse. The last line of the novel suggests that Claiborne is indeed on the road to his rightful place as a Christian artist when he pictures his return to Maryfarm: 'He could be sitting there on the beach with the other bums when she came down in the morning.'

The Malefactors indicates Caroline's increasing ambivalence toward her role as an artist who is also a woman. If Adam has the interpretive role, why is Eve writing all these novels? Caroline was conscious of this dilemma, as she wrote in a letter to Ward Dorrance about the time she was completing *The Malefactors*: 'While I am a woman I am also a freak. The work I do is not suitable for a woman. It is unsexing. I speak with real conviction here. I don't write 'the womanly' novel. I write the same kind of novel a man would write, only it is ten times harder for me to write it than it would be for a man who had the same degree of talent. Dr. Johnson was right: a woman at intellectual labor is always a dog walking on its hind legs.... I bite off more than I can chew all the time.'

The pity here is that this intelligent, spirited, even feisty woman ultimately felt she had to accept the verdict of her male-dominated culture and religion [She says it was her own 'real conviction,' she was not forced. When a woman disagrees with them, Feminist critics deny that she has free will and claim she was forced to her conclusion by a patriarchal society. Feminists do not allow women to have independent minds. Feminists are the ones who are forcing.] to regard herself as a freak or a dog on its hind legs.... *The Malefactors* was the last piece of imaginative fiction she ever wrote. *The Glory of Hera* is a retelling of myth and the fragments of *A Narrow Heart* are autobiography or family history. 'It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears.' This is an epitaph for her career as an artist, and she chose it as the epitaph for her life. It is graven on her tombstone.

Despite the fact that *The Malefactors* is a statement of *submission to patriarchal* values (It is a statement of submission to Christian values. In the end Tom submits to Vera, not she to him. Italics added.) some of the living models for the characters did not perceive it as such. Dorothy Day was shown the manuscript... and was horrified by the references to Black Masses and alchemical experiments using consecrated wine... Adam-Claiborne-Allen was also somewhat upset. After all, the last line of the novel has him characterizing himself as a 'bum' without his wife. *To his credit*, Allen did not wrap himself in the doctrine that a woman should be subject to her husband, but the somewhat stinging portrayal rankled." [Italics added. This critic here rejects Catholicism in favor of the attitude that makes Feminists a poor risk for marriage. Wives and husbands must be "subject" to each other.]

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 206-10

"In the winter of 1951, Caroline began a new novel, *The Malefactors*, a story of one man's journey of faith, 'the old story that is or ought to be the story of every human being.' But the women in her story occupied most of her time and energy. They represented Caroline's struggle to find wholeness, her failure to reconcile her ambitions as a writer with her expectations of proper feminine behavior.

From the start Caroline knew the basic plot she wanted to use in her novel. Her hero was the poet Thomas Claiborne, who lived with his wife, Vera, in an old Pennsylvania Dutch farmhouse. Although Tom struggled to write, he had no trouble adopting an attitude of condescension toward his wife and friends. When Vera's sister [later cousin] appeared, Tom would be easily led into adultery. Vera's sister would also be a poet, and Tom would be drawn into the affair in part by his better nature, his desire to help her with her poetry. Relying too much on his pride, wits, and intellect, Thomas would nearly destroy himself before he found the path to salvation, returning to his true mate and a life of faith....

Caroline split her own self-image into pieces: she was part Vera, part Vera's sister, and even part Tom.... Although, unlike Caroline, Vera has a similar psychological history. She had lived in many places as a child, 'always craving to live in one place and craving, too, a settled home life,' Caroline wrote in her notes. 'She is a person who wanted very much to live, but was brought up in circumstances that frustrated her every impulse.' Often subject to what others thought were inexplicable rages, Vera was 'seeking love desperately through the creature.' Her rages resulted from suspicions that her husband did not really love her. Caroline was not as generous to Vera's sister. Just as in her earlier writings, she thought of the women as opposites or mirror images, Vera was the submissive wife, the nurturing homemaker; she had no intellect, just intuition. Her sister was the adventuring artist, the selfish home wrecker. She has a considerable intellect, which had been 'sharpened by the help of her father, the Devil'...

Caroline...settled on the name of Cynthia. Like the moon, she would be a false light, a 'Lilith or Night Monster,' a strange woman... How Vera and Tom reacted to Bud's [prize bull] escapades would reveal their fundamentally different perspectives on life and love.... Whenever Caroline compared Vera and Cynthia, she concentrated on the differences between the two women. And yet Vera and Cynthia were similar. Although she exaggerated their tendencies and disguised their appearances, Caroline continued to fashion them in her own image.

She gave Vera most of her best qualities: Vera loved nature and animals; she was intuitive and generous to a fault, naive and trusting. Cynthia did not fare so well. Caroline gave the elder sister most of the personality traits she disliked in her own life. Cynthia was 'outwardly very demure and feminine,' but she was wily and egotistical. She was 'perhaps too direct, too brusque,' Caroline noted. Cynthia would become angry and defensive about her writing. Although Caroline endowed the women with talent and a fine intellect, she suggested Cynthia would be better off without either. 'Cynthia has missed out on everything that makes life worth while to a woman,' Caroline wrote in her notes. 'Therefore her ambition grows larger. Life must make up to her for what she has missed'....

In a way Caroline's technique in *The Malefactors* would resemble the blended architecture of Rome. While following the main action, Thomas Claiborne's struggle for faith, the reader would stumble across fragments of the past, like the broken friezes preserved in the walls of modern apartment buildings. When

those fragments were examined, their stories revealed through careful excavating, they would illuminate and deepen the present scene.... The stories of the dead characters had to 'unfold chronologically, counter-clockwise to the main action,' Caroline explained to a friend. Tom and Vera's fathers and Horne Watts would never really appear in the novel, and yet they had to be as fully developed as any of the living characters. Their life stories would run parallel to and serve as a sort of choral comment on the rest of the narrative.... By associating her husband's struggles with those of her father, Vera hoped to 'see the good fight fought again--and won. That was one of the reasons Vera married Tom...It was also part of the reason Caroline remained married to Allen....

In the marriage of Vera and Tom Claiborne, she dramatized the problems in her own marriage. Just like Allen, Tom accused Vera of being too much of a romantic, of expecting too much from him. Vera 'frightened me, the way she thought I could change the whole world,' Tom said.... He was to give her everything she had ever wanted and never got. When she found that he could not do it (what man could?) she had turned away from him (for she could not deny that in the last few years she had turned away from him!) to lose herself in frenetic activity.' Like Allen, Tom would have preferred his wife to be a little less demanding....

In the past she had sometimes used a male narrator to prove her expertise as a writer, but this time she may have also done so to veil some of her harshest criticism of Allen. Throughout the novel Caroline suggested through dramatic irony that Tom destroyed his marriage because he was a cold, all-too-conceited intellectual. Like Allen, Tom considered himself the expert on all things, and he consequently looked down on his wife, her activities, and many of her friends. Although shocked when Vera lied to him, Tom did not hesitate to tell her falsehoods and shut her out of his life. He precipitated their marriage problems by being too introspective and self-centered while accusing his wife of withdrawing from him emotionally.... For his part, Allen called the book a masterpiece, equal to the writing of Virginia Woolf...

Overtly, Caroline appeared to be championing the traditional patriarchal values in the closing scenes of *The Malefactors*. She even chose an epigraph from an essay by Jacques Maritain to reinforce these values: 'It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears.' And yet once again, consciously or not, Caroline suggested another level of meaning and interpretation for those beliefs. A wife may be subject to her husband, but he must first be stripped of his pride and truly solicitous of his wife. He must recognize and respect the 'voices' that she hears, accept her as his muse. Far from relegating the woman to a minor, subservient role, Caroline once again could be said to be elevating her. Just as in *The Woman on the Porch*, the man's salvation depended on the woman.

Throughout the novel Caroline used her female characters to guide Tom. Although he scorned them and considered them fools, the women in his life actually knew him better than he knew himself. Their wisdom would lead him to a proper reverence for his family, his wife, and his God. Although Caroline developed this theme in her usual subterranean way, she nevertheless implied that if Tom ignored the women's advice, he was doomed to be a rootless wanderer in the depths of hell."

NancyLee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 296-97, 306, 314-15, 330-31, 338

"In her third Christian comedy, *The Malefactors* (1956), Gordon leaned even more heavily both on her personal situation and the Christian theme. There she made another lapsed poet, Tom Claiborne, her central intelligence and built her story on details of her years with Tate--his infidelities, his preoccupation with dreams, and their onetime friendship with the unfortunate Hart Crane, whose disorderly life she saw as an unfulfilled quest for transcendental love. That love comes at last to her hero Claiborne through the ministrations of a saintly Catherine Pollard, reminiscent of the Catholic philanthropist Dorothy Day, who teaches him the meaning of human relationship and guides him to a reconciliation with his wife."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 68

[This is a radical Feminist critic]: "In *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*...she turns her attention to the salvation of the frustrated, intellectual, emasculated man who needs to locate his authority and assume responsibility.... Stephen Lewis and Thomas Claiborne *assert their point of view and their desires over their respective wives* at the close of both these novels.... [False: They both submit to their wives. Italics added.] Tom Claiborne of *The Malefactors* is...finally propelled into action. A man haunted by his dreams of artists who cannot express their suffering or their love, a cruel and unfaithful husband, Tom drives to the refuge that his wife has found for herself, a community in which she cares for the homeless and the handicapped. There, he finds reconciliation based upon his restored faith that wives, according to doctrine, must be submissive to their husbands. *The Malefactors* represents, certainly, Gordon's most stunning declamation of masculine authority [Feminists do not know that God is the authority.] and feminine forgiveness and submission.... If we are to save our culture--and save our marriages--[misses the main point: saving our souls] intellectual man must construct and articulate a moral vision, which is derived from the intuitions of women who serve as unresisting vehicles for divine revelations....

Gordon suggests that we have failed because the patriarchal order in America was constructed out of ignorance, oppression, and greed rather than intelligence, charity, and self-sacrifice. Our culture was built on faith in the individual rather than faith in a greater power; on self-interest rather than love. Thus, in her later works, we witness her progression toward traditional religious faith. Her dramatic scenes are designed to propel man into selfless action because, she believes, the modern crisis of identity has affected him more critically than it has affected woman....

Of Gordon's later heroines, most transformed, perhaps, is Vera Claiborne of *The Malefactors*, the true woman, as her name suggests. In this novel, Gordon creates a woman who habitually relies on body language rather than on words, who also unconsciously contributes to the emasculation of her husband through her wealth, her business acumen, and, most tellingly [?], her interest in artificial insemination of cattle. [She opposes it.] By the novel's end, she finds her true role as she embraces a life of poverty and active charity. Vera, the childless mother figure and repressed daughter of an egotistical and artistic father, discovers her husband has been unfaithful and, like Catherine Chapman, originally considers suicide. Turning to religion rather than to her past, she realizes how her marriage allowed her to misspend her energy and money: catering to but largely ignoring her bored and cynical husband, raising her prizewinning bulls, and entertaining an odd mixture of alienated relatives and friends. Her realization of his affair leads her to freedom that allows her to understand her duty to serve the poor and the homeless.

While Gordon consistently depicts the 'good' women in *The Malefactors*, like Vera and Catherine Pollard, from a distance [?] and emphasizes their otherworldliness and newfound commitment to good works, she commits much more space to revealing the hidden, frustrated, distorted, or evil natures of the bad women. Physically and mentally, Cynthia Vail, translator and seductress, is the antithesis of her cousin Vera.... Snakelike Cynthia is pale and green-eyed.... Cynthia seduces Vera's husband Tom by drawing out his suppressed questions about his wife and her odd relationship with her father. In the early stages of their relations, Tom fears Cynthia's influence because she makes him 'think too much about the past,' before his marriage, when he was heralded as a promising young genius. Cynthia alienates Tom from his wife and intimates that Vera's family, but particularly her father, 'was very--unusual...' Claiming that Vera's unnatural devotion to her egotistical and eccentric father--who was also rumored as being a homosexual--led her to keep hidden his last shocking paintings, Cynthia trains Tom to gaze at Vera from the detached, cold, yet intrigued perspective of the Peeping Tom....

While it may be likely that Vera catered to her idle husband out of fear of rejection by the fatherly man (as...perhaps Gordon catered to Tate), Vera finally survives the rejection of her self-absorbed father and models her life in opposition to his. Gordon achieved the same end. Through her narrative strategies and her artfulness, Gordon often raises our interest in how her life may be revealed in her fiction but constantly frustrates *our* search. [Because as a Feminist you are uneducated and cannot interpret objectively. Italics added.] Here she does this by deflecting Tom's attention from his mediation of Vera's relation to her father to Cynthia and the power of her seductive and dangerous voice.... Tom originally associates Cynthia with the Sibyl, the female cave-dweller who delivers her confused messages to the hero, but Tom knows he has heard that voice all through his life 'in some dark crevice of his own brain.' By allowing these feminine voices to haunt him, he positions himself to drown in the watery caverns where other frustrated male artists,

like the homosexual poet Horne Watts...have surrendered their powers.... [Hart Crane] did not understand his manly authority. Such men are not informed by the Sibyl but consumed by *la belle dame sans merci*.

As a model of feminine evil and a creator of constructive discord, Cynthia has the ability to move Tom out of his stagnating and loveless life, out of his dependence on Vera, but she does not free Tom. A cunning designer of exterior reality, Cynthia strives to shape and manipulate him; she attempts to translate him as she translates the words of others, but she has no power to create on her own. She cannot craft an original or coherent vision of love or work of art. More like the vampire than the Sibyl or lover, she sucks the blood from the living for her own perverted nourishment. Tom identifies her as a creature of the night.... Cynthia is the vampire, but all vampires, according to legend, are invited guests, and Tom must come to understand how his inability to assert his authority, to accept Vera's strengths as well as her faults, and to keep his faith have opened the door to this horror. As a manifestation of his own 'diabolical intelligence,' Cynthia reflects his submerged desire to surrender his will to feminine control, to vanquish himself.

In Caroline Gordon's mature fiction, the woman who mirrors the man, as the moon reflects the sun, is no true woman. She betrays or ignores woman's power. Accepting the idea that men and women discover wisdom and values in different sources and exercise them in different spheres, Gordon stresses the necessary tension between the sexes.... Gordon identifies the male consciousness with intelligence and the female with intuition.... 'True' women are not associated with the intellect; they bring him mysterious access to the divine in both the natural and supernatural worlds. If the man fails to gain access to the wisdom the woman contains, he remains, like Claiborne, the unredeemed man of clay. Gordon describes this condition in *How to Read a Novel*: 'The hero who does not reach out to a world outside himself--that world which, from time immemorial, has been personified in the feminine consciousness--is left confronting himself. The only adventure that beckons is self-expression.' Likewise, the women in Gordon's novels who, out of fear or arrogance, deny man access to their intuitions are filled with repression, self-doubt, or bitter silence.

Like the two preceding novels, *The Malefactors* tells the story of the paralyzed, cynical intellectual man who, through madness or supernatural or spiritual agency, receives a divine or mythic vision and is poised to act upon that vision. Whereas Jim Chapman's last act was treated with great ambiguity as he proposed to lead his wife out of her ancestral home back to the city, and Stephen Lewis's groan led to no immediate action, Tom Claiborne's final act is unambiguously celebrated. Vera learns she withheld herself from Tom and from good works; Tom recognizes that he had abnegated his manly responsibilities; they have been redeemed by their Christian vision and good works and can live in harmony.

Gordon heralds fictional women who become less directive and more open with and receptive of men; they are essential to the men whose words or acts are dependent upon their mysterious knowledge. What mysterious knowledge women have, however, is never fully revealed. The abyss remains unplumbed. The dark knowledge that Cassie so feared in *Green Centuries*, the power of the ancient goddess, invested in the landscape of *The Women on the Porch*, has been left undefined. For Gordon it is better to subdue, redefine, domesticate, or translate the knowledge from the Great Goddess."

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson U 2002) 168, 171-72, 176-79

All of us are the malefactors, according to the belief that all human beings are inherently inclined to do wrong. This novel focuses on wrongs done mostly by "sick intellectuals" in New York, but the basic truths revealed are universal: "Every human soul is different from every other human soul. But all human hearts are the same." The first event in *The Malefactors* is Vera leading a bull to be exhibited, introducing a number of themes. This red bull is something to be looked at and discussed. Contrast the indirection and detached subtlety of Gordon with the explicitness of Melville in his introduction of the white whale, his symbol of Truth. Vera likewise represents veritas--Truth. Vera is Catholic, her values are agrarian and her charity is evidence of salvation. When Tom is implicitly converted he realizes his need for Vera and returns to her in humility. He has been living a life full of bull in the slang sense and he needs to be led by Vera. Gordon is a richly allusive writer who deserves to be credited with all the pertinent associations generated by her symbols. After all, this bull was bred to be a progenitor.

Bulls were gods in the ancient world. The people of Crete lined palace walls with sculpted bull's horns and birthed the myth of the Minotaur, the bull man. In modern times, men tend to make gods of themselves. His psychiatrist George Crenfew refers to Tom as "Bre'r Bull." At a party with Cynthia, Tom feels "it is I who am being exhibited tonight--in Marianne's apartment." Vera calls her red bull "Bud," a common general nickname for a man. Red is the color of passion as in the case of Red the prizewinning horse electrocuted by chomping a light bulb in *The Women on the Porch*. When Tom leaves to pick up Cynthia at the train station and says to Vera that he will tell Cynthia the party for the bull "is for her" Gordon implies that the symbol of the bull may apply to a woman as well as to a man. The wild bull in man is so dangerous it must be led in subjection or imprisoned, repressed in the depths--the unconscious symbolized by a cave. Throughout the novel the association of human nature with the Minotaur in a labyrinth is amplified by all the bull and cave symbolism in Tom's process of self-discovery. Without knowing where he is going he wanders "in the labyrinths of illicit love."

The traditional bullfight as developed in Spain is a tragedy: the bull represents wild Nature, which is divine but must be sacrificed in order to establish civilization. The sacrifice of bulls is a pagan ritual comparable to the sacrifice of lambs by early Jews. Both practices were superseded by the self-sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God. To follow Christ is to sacrifice the figurative bull of the willful self and to be led by Him. Self-sacrifice, a characteristic of heroism, is a supreme theme in Gordon. In this sense, Vera is Christ-evoking, whereas Horne Watts is half bull--a "poor devil" with one horn[e] but also with the power (watts) to generate light in his poetry. Her charity exemplifies the right kind of self-sacrifice, his suicide the wrong kind. Max painted "The Vision of St. Eustace," who hunted a stag that had "Christ hanging on the cross between its horns." Max turned the stag into a bull and Tom says to Marcia the sex-obsessed Freudian, "the erection between the horns, Madam, is a cross, not a phallus."

Gordon's preceding novel *The Strange Children* established the word *strange* as such an emphatic motif that its main implication, cut off from the Spirit, carries over into this novel, as when Tom asks Vera before she becomes religious "Are you one of the strange people?" and she replies "I am a stranger." Subsequently he says "it's a strange world" and Marcia says "Tom, I don't think you'd find it quite so strange if you'd...be less introspective. Get out of yourself more." Other archetypal motifs in her fiction that recur here include springs from underground as images of spiritual renewal, like the one at the end of the novel where Claiborne finds Vera, and vines associated with the growth of evil, as when Claiborne begins his affair with Cynthia and feels "as if his and Vera's separation were a fruit budding underground on some great swollen vine." Later Cynthia is seen in "Shadows cast by the vines overhead." Then when Vera's brother Robin spots Claiborne with Cynthia in a restaurant and expresses his disapproval by turning away, he looks instead at "the vine-clad trellis behind Claiborne."

One of the strangest characters in the novel is Joe Hess, the promoter of artificial insemination who has the last name of an infamous Nazi and is so perverse he thinks "we've been overemphasizing the virtues of mother's milk." His common name Joe suggests that in the modern world the worship of science and technology in place of God has become common. This idolatry is in the tradition of alchemy, which Claiborne calls the pursuit of "something for nothing": "Joe's in league with the Powers of Darkness." Joe embodies the modern trend of expediency replacing humanity that led to Nazism, mass extermination of "inferior" people and World War II. Claiborne envisions a future in which everybody would be "reduced to ashes--or some other utilizable product." Bud the bull represents the ultimate supremacy of God and Nature over human pride and futile interference--as does the white whale--when he jumps the fence and impregnates two of the heifers belonging to Joe Hess. Today, human pride is demonstrated by the insane popular notion that we (excluding India and China who refuse to cooperate) can act as God and change the climate of the earth if we will simply agree to enormously increase our taxes and vote Socialist. By now, artificial insemination likewise has become a major issue in the modern world of prevailing liberal values: "Women still have wombs though there is a question whether they are functional."

In style *The Malefactors* is Gordon's most Expressionistic novel so far. Previously she has favored the Modernist technique of multiple points of view, but here, except in dialogue, she has limited herself mainly to the perspective of Tom Claiborne, which enables her to use Expressionistic thoughts, dreams, memories and visions that are challenging to interpret and would be too confusing if given to more than one character. Also, moving further beyond the classicism and simplicity of her early style, there are more long periodic

sentences that complicate thought than in previous novels, one of which is compared to a vine. Style is content, especially Expressionistic style, as Claiborne notes when he says to himself, "The very shape of your sentences reflects a disordered mind."

Michael Hollister (2019)